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## Testing whether eco certifications sell tourism services

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## Testing whether eco certifications sell tourism services

### Abstract

Eco certifications are accepted as a tool to help suppliers in the tourism industry establish environmental performance goals. They help suppliers to adopt environmentally sustainable standards, and simultaneously help potential customers recognizing environmentally sustainable products and services. Customer attitudes toward eco certifications and willingness to pay for them have been well documented in literature, commonly identifying favorable attitudes toward eco certified products. However, despite previous work it is unclear if eco certifications have an impact on the actual purchase behavior. This study uses a small case study to test a method which aims to assess the impact eco certification has on purchase behavior, and investigate what role attitudes play in the decision making. Results from the case study indicate that attitudes toward eco certifications are not a good predictor for purchase behavior and despite good intentions the majority of tourists does not seem to be affected by eco certifications.

### Keywords

eco, certifications, whether, sell, testing, tourism, services

### Disciplines

Business

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# TESTING WHETHER ECO CERTIFICATIONS SELL TOURISM SERVICES

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## ABSTRACT

Eco certifications are accepted as a tool to help suppliers in the tourism industry establish environmental performance goals. They help suppliers to adopt environmentally sustainable standards, and simultaneously help potential customers recognizing environmentally sustainable products and services. Customer attitudes toward eco certifications and willingness to pay for them have been well documented in literature, commonly identifying favorable attitudes toward eco certified products. However, despite previous work it is unclear if eco certifications have an impact on the actual purchase behavior. This study uses a small case study to test a method which aims to assess the impact eco certification has on purchase behavior, and investigate what role attitudes play in the decision making. Results from the case study indicate that attitudes toward eco certifications are not a good predictor for purchase behavior and despite good intentions the majority of tourists does not seem to be affected by eco certifications.

## INTRODUCTION

Eco certifications are awarded to suppliers in the tourism industry as recognition for environmentally sustainable practices. Eco certifications aid in the adoption of more sustainable practices, and tell potential customers that the operator offers environmentally sustainable services. Eco certifications have been used for marketing purposes (Buckley, 2002), where the eco certification is used to differentiate services from competitors in the market (Dann, 1997). As the certification process is expensive (Sasidharan, Sirakaya, and Kerstetter, 2002) suppliers are unsure whether pursuing eco certification is worth doing (Rowe and Higham, 2007). If eco certification does bring more business, costs of certification could be paid for with increased revenue or premium pricing of services.

Much of previous work has been focused on consumer attitudes towards eco certifications (Oom do Valle et al., 2012; Puhakka and Siikamäki, 2012) and the link to intentions (Fairweather, Maslin and Simmons, 2005), how eco certifications affect information search (Reiser and Simmons 2005) and recently customer perception of eco certificates (Esparon, Gyuris and Stoeckl, 2013). Because actual behavior is never used it is unclear whether eco certification does affect actual purchase behavior and whether self reported positive attitudes towards eco certifications translate into increase in sales.

The present paper extends the current body of knowledge by challenging the value of using respondents' self-reported behavior as a predictor for purchase behavior. The method used aims to empirically investigate the effect eco certification has on tourists' choice of service providers and assess if there are niche market segments more susceptible to eco certified offers.

## METHODOLOGY

We conducted a pseudo-experimental field experiment at the sales offices of two competing tour operators. Customers were approached after purchasing a tour and invited to complete a survey.

Approaching customers after purchase was made was done to eliminate any potential pretesting effects (Banks 1964). Both operators offered similar products (price, length of tour, sites visited were all similar), with eco certification of the operator being the main difference. One operator carried both the Blue Flag eco certification (<http://www.blueflag.org/>) and was EarthCheck certified (<http://www.earthcheck.org/>). The other had no eco certification. After removing incomplete surveys, a total of 75 surveys were analyzed, or 36 from the eco certified operator and 39 from the operator that was not certified (control). The aim was to get 30 participants from each operator, a recommended minimum for group comparison (Wilson Van Voorhis and Morgan 2007).

Participants responded to a question addressing whether the tour they purchased was eco certified or not (providing three answer options, “yes”, “no”, “I don’t know”). The study also investigated the stated reasons for choosing the tour (e.g. “I chose this tour because I want adventure and excitement”), using forced binary format for items (“yes”, “no”) to avoid evasion bias (Dolnicar and Grün, 2013). How different attributes affected the choice of the particular operator were also investigated (e.g. “To which degree did these attributes affect your choice of THIS tour operator? Environmental impact of the tour”) using a three point rating scale (“Did NOT affect my choice”, “Did affect my choice” and “Significantly affected my choice”). Information on background variables were also collected which provided further information needed to profile customer segments. Data were analyzed using chi square test of independence, binary logistic regression and descriptive statistics.

## PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Preliminary results indicate that eco certifications do not seem to have an overall affect on customer choice. The majority of participants in the study was either unaware of whether the tour they purchased was eco certified or not, or incorrectly believed the tour was eco certified. Contradicting actual behavior, the study revealed that most participants stated that environmental impact of the tour did affect the choice of the tour. This inconsistency indicates that the majority of participants was influenced by social desirability bias (Fisher 1993) when asked about attitudes. Relying on attitudes only is misleading as the implication would be that eco certification is worth pursuing for service providers. When actual behavior is taken into account the opposite holds true, making eco certification less attractive alternative for product differentiation. Despite eco certificates did not have an overall effect on purchase behavior a niche market responding positively to eco certification was identified. This suggests that eco certification could be worth pursuing for service providers using selective targeting of customers.

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